entropy

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by cjhou

Summary

And Todd nods as he sniffles, blinking as his eyes threaten to blur. He can only nod when he feels his teacher pat him on the shoulder, murmuring apologies that he doesn't need to say at all.

"I just wish they didn't have to take him away. I mean, he'd be alright. I think he'd be, but…"

When he spends a considerable amount of time in silence, Keating takes this opportunity to voice out what's in his mind, and to say what he's been seeing in all of Todd since he entered the room, nerves and all.

"Now, why do you care so much?" he starts off gently, careful in the way he says it, like stepping on a puddle, "You're the one who hasn't been around for a long time, especially with him. It's only been four months that you've known each other, that you've known Mr. Perry."

"Well, yeah, but he's my roommate. He's my friend. And… and he's helped me…a lot."

"But it's a lot more than that. Isn't it, Todd?"

Where Neil runs back to Welton and tells Todd about his parents' plans to send him away, and Todd has to come to terms with all of what he feels before it happens.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

From the moment Mr. Perry sits awake, there's already this feeling nestling deep into his stomach that something is amiss.

He looks to the door for a moment, at that space between him and what's beyond, sitting in the dark and allowing his thoughts to catch up to him before he moves to turn on the lamp on his bedside. He moves as if undaunted, like he's just waking up for another day, because his shuffling wakes up his wife, her side of the room brightening with the glow of her own lamp.

"What is it?" she asks, still drowsy from sleep.

Mr. Perry, ever the man of so few words, doesn't reply, merely sitting up and tying his robe properly around his waist before he goes to open their bedroom door, stepping out into the dark walls of their household and down the stairs, switching on the lights as he goes. His wife follows him.

Once he's farther down the corridor and the silence and abnormal energy of the house seeps deep farther from just his skin and into his bones, he calls out, "Neil?"

There's no answer.

As if instinct, he goes to check in his son's bedroom, the first immediate place any parent would assume their child to be, but once he opens the door, unlocked, and switches the light on, the room is undisturbed. And empty. The bed sheets are unwrinkled, the pajamas they laid out for him untouched.

The only stark difference here is the open window.

Snow blows in, December inviting its way into their home, and he goes to shut it close, though not before noticing the wreathe sitting unbothered right beside it. It's the same one his son was clutching throughout the entire ride back home and throughout the talk they'd had in his office. White flecks of snow rest and melt on its surface.

He shuts the window.

He passes by the hamper where it's empty of any laundry, and the coat hanger by the door is vacant.

He goes to check his study next, in the lone door down the corner of the mainroom.

Just as he enters, he hears his wife call to him, “I’ll go look outside.”

He switches on the light, lets his eyes scan past each of the room’s corners before noticing nothing out of the ordinary. Until he sees *it* on his desk.

He rarely took it out from where he stored it, seeing no need for it in most recent years. He’d mainly kept it just for keepsakes and because of a “just in case” from his wife, though he never saw any real point to it as the police could only be a dial away. Besides, they lived in a good neighborhood, he’d never be caught walking in any street that wasn’t, and if he was, it wouldn’t be because of any own personal desire. He'd nearly forgotten what the thing looked like now, collecting dust in some cabinet or drawer he’d kept it in.

But, even with it bundled up in cloth and fabric and placed still on the tabletop, Mr. Perry could recognize it precisely.

He goes to approach, his breath held as he walks closer to the table, anticipating something he doesn’t know, and doesn’t stop even as his hands graze and peel back the cloth that enshrouds the item held firmly in his hands.

The weight of the gun feels heavy in his palm, and he’s careful with the way he handles it, cautious that he might set it off. It’s only when he's moving to set it down that he hears his wife call for him from outside the house, and he lets go of the firearm before he’s headed his way.

“Tom, look!” his wife exclaims, anxiety ridden in her voice when she finally sees him descend from the doorway and out into the cold. She looks to a path of footprints in the snow, outspread and going farther and farther from the house until snowfall stops the path.

He doesn’t know if it’d been the night they had, or if it’s the winter cold that makes his sleep more comforting, but Todd lies in his bed quietly and without any toss or turns. The sheets are cold instead of an itchy hot, the bottoms of his pillow are a nice cool that he loves to

feel, and the blanket feels like a distant hug he'd felt before.

In his dreams, he's walking on some crowded pavement, the faces of every other person in the street blurring out of focus like all the cars that run by. It's somewhere around March. The sunlight glints off of building windows and onto the street, where there are trees spread out here and there, the light making the green look yellow. When he looks up, heights look back down at him, the tallest buildings and skyscrapers reaching out to the clouds, with billboards and vertical signs sticking to the cement of their walls, and the sunlight comes out from the gray-blue shadows as he walks by, glinting against his vision. When he closes his eyes, it's red, and then golden.

When his head goes to look back down, to face the world that he stands on, he's waiting at a crosswalk with other strangers for the light to turn green, all of them without faces and names. Before him, sunlight glints off the side of the building ahead, bathing the street in front of him with gold as cars and buses blur in speed. When the light turns green and the street comes to a standstill, there's one face in the crowd of people before him that stands out.

He knows it before he can even attach a name to it.

He looks older, with lines beneath his eyes he doesn't recognize, but still the same nonetheless. The way his brows lift and crease is the same, even if his jaw looks stronger and his nose more prominent than it had been. His hair's also longer, waves of it sneaking behind his ears so it won't cover his eyes, even if there are still strands that fall over his forehead. And his eyes—they're still the same. And when they catch each other's gaze, the glint of the sun almost reflects and bounces right off of *his* own and it sparkles with that innocence it had in that small bedroom they shared when they were still boys in some school up Vermont. His mouth is the same too, cupid's bows stretching into a smile when he calls his name. Even from across the road, Todd can hear it, can see how his lips move, the way the person who says it is bathed in golden light.

"Todd."

When he's shaken awake, he has it in him to groan in complaint and turn his back to his troubler before he's being shaken awake again, moved to turn his body to face whoever this person is, this time joined with the gentle call of his name.

The golden street and the stained walls and ceiling of his dorm start to

blend in—fading in, fading out.

“Todd.”

He turns his head, eyes fighting to not close when he sees the face of his roommate by his bedside—that enough to finally let him sit up and face the boy beside him.

“Neil?” he slurs as he lets his back rest against the bed frame.

“Todd.” the boy replies in a whisper, a soft smile pouring into his features.

“What’s going on?” Todd asks. “Weren’t you with your parents? Why are you here?”

Neil’s face falls at this, the shine and mirth in his eyes disappearing as he solemnly looks down and avoids his friend’s gaze.

“Neil?” Todd pries once more. Silence greets him.

“They’re sending me away tomorrow.” Neil finally tells him. Todd blinks. Neil chuckles, though it’s wet and without humor, like the way his eyes sparkle with tears that are yet to fall. “They, uh, they didn’t like what I did tonight.” he smiles bitterly.

“They can’t do that!” Todd knows that isn’t true though. He knows that Neil’s parents would send him away to Mars if they could, no amount of any money big enough to get him far away, even from them, so long as they know he won’t be in any trouble.

He’s now awake, every bit of sleep and drowsy bone wiped away and extinct from his body, pacing down the small space between their beds inside of their quiet dorm.

Military school? That isn’t Neil at all!

He finally stops pacing, body still as he turns to Neil and says, “Can’t we tell Mr. Keating?”

Neil laughs. “What power does Mr. Keating have against my father?” he responded, succumbed. “He’d have him fired if he wanted to.”

“But you can’t leave!” Todd stresses, the dread of this news displaying itself openly all over his face—the way his brows nearly touch and how his face goes red, and the way jitters dance across his whole body and ends in tingles all over his fingers, leaving them completely cold.

Neil only chuckles, exasperation leaving him in a breath of the words, “It’s not like I have a choice!”

“Then why are you here?” Todd interjects, his voice wavering but strong enough to convey how much of this makes him feel.

Neil doesn’t reply immediately, letting silence sit between them as Todd looks down at him from where Neil’s sat on his bed, and Neil’s boring holes into the floor and into Todd’s slippers.

“I would’ve died if I stayed at home.” he finally says, his voice breaking in parts as he licks his lips dry and purses them tightly. His hands are pressed close together, and he can’t look Todd in the eyes. The memory of the cold and shadowed walls of his home creeps into his mind that when he blinks it’s all he can see. The way he’d walked silently as he fetched, with great quiet, what would have been a decision that would’ve made things not any better, he thinks now in retrospect, unable to picture his father seeing what it meant, only another loss to Neil. That’s all it would’ve been. *I’m trapped*, he remembers himself saying back inside Mr. Keating’s matchbox office.

He sniffles as Todd stays silent, watching Neil with careful and sad eyes.

“I mean–” Neil takes the chance to say, clearing his throat of snot and sniffling once more, before he shakes his head, dismissing it, “...and they’re sure to get upset when they find out I’m not at home, especially my father. I can’t really do anything else. I’m not… the one who gets to decide when it comes to him. I can’t do anything else except go.”

Neil stews in this moment of surrender, the breeze blowing white noise, even from all the way outside the window.

“No.” Todd says after all the silence.

Neil finally looks up to meet him in the eyes.

“What?”

There’s a spark of *something* in Todd’s eyes, desperation and another

thing Neil can't quite name—or it's something that he doesn't have a name for.

"No." Todd repeats.

He recognizes this. For *right now*, it's somewhere between late night and early morning, the world's quiet and he's sure there's no one else awake besides them; whereas in the *first time*, it had been somewhere in early noon and Neil had to push through dozens of students just to get up the stairs to make it to his dorm. The weather was warm before, while now, Neil's still covertly rubbing his hands from getting cold, keeping them buried in his coat from the winter chill. Neil was taller then, it was Todd that had been shorter, far meeker than someone who doesn't even share a name with the word.

Neil wonders what this looks like in Todd's eyes. To have this scene in reverse, where Neil's the one who needs to be told words that'll make him feel less worse and horrible and more like a person. He wonders if Todd even recognizes that this is something they've already done before.

"'No' what?"

"No, you don't have to do this." Todd insists once more, and he kneels on the floor by Neil's side, his one arm resting on the mattress where a small inch of it is grazing Neil's leg, his eyes pleading and looking up into his. Neil won't look back. He only shakes his head.

"It's not up to me." he says decidedly, and it's silent, his eyes going to look at him and resting so perfectly on Todd's own gaze that it shakes him.

Todd isn't even sure whether the conversation between them was over or not until Neil went to lie down, facing the wall and curling in on himself and being so unlike Neil that it bothered Todd to his core, like the whole world got tipped off its axis, and now they're just lost.

It's still dark when Todd finally sits up from his bed, the stirring in his chest unquelled since earlier that night. The room's still dark, the shadows that fall over each crevice and over his roommate's face too dim for him to see any clear detail, but when he peeks outside the

window, the world is tainted in blacks and the darkest shade of blue, the grounds of Welton looking more beautiful when it looks like this, quiet and undisturbed, uninhabited.

He never got to sleep at all, not since Neil told him it would all be over for him today—when his parents, and his father, would make him clear out his room and say goodbye. Granted, Todd knows Welton isn't really any much good either. It's all the same—the same people with different faces repeating the words *tradition* and *values* and *excellence* like some church canticle and dulling down any soul that has any sense of promise into something else entirely different, altered in ways that it isn't even the same person anymore. He just wishes they didn't have to take him away. Neil would've managed well just fine here. Here at least he'd have something to keep waking up for.

Todd doesn't even realize he's at the door until he's opening it, slowly so the hinges don't make any noise, and he's out into the quiet hallway, dark and without light, and where every sound is a hundred times louder than it usually would be.

He can feel all the other boys inside their dorms, sleeping away until the time comes for their clocks to start ringing and the day starts over again. His watch is by his bedside and he doesn't want to risk waking anyone else by going back inside to fetch it, so he furthers to walk down the hallowed halls, breathing in the scent of it, of aged wood and the scent of wax on polished floor that causes his nose to flare.

The halls are empty, even as he makes it to where the teachers are, and he's extra careful as he walks, paying mind to every squeak of his slippers on the hardwood, careful of any fabric that might get snatched onto a prong or peg that'll lead him to slip. Any creak he hears, he freezes, the thump loud and pounding in his ears into a sharp ring before he moves again after he eases himself into thinking it was nothing.

It's only when he's standing in front of the door that he feels his limbs loosen and then quickly tighten again when the possibility of not having it open sinks into him. But nevertheless, he knocks, gently, the sound of his knuckles against wood ringing loudly to his ears and he thinks another door will open before the one he wants will as he stands still for what feels like seconds stretching into minutes and into hours.

When the door finally opens, he releases a breath, seeing the face of their English teacher peep his head from inside. He doesn't look

disturbed, rather, he looks like he'd been awake since before Todd even decided to come here.

"Mr. Anderson? I didn't peg you to be such an early bird." he chuckles, and then steps aside to open the door wider, inviting him to step inside, "Come in, sit down."

But the problem here is he can't sit down, restless in a way that makes his limbs feel longer and bigger than they are, and the tightness of Keating's office doesn't help the feeling even a bit. So he remains standing, even after Keating cleared his seat of any books or trinkets that were there, his hands shaking just slightly as they hang at his sides.

"Sorry, no tea, I'm afraid. I ran out."

"It's alright."

His eyes wander to the spaces and corners of the room, even in the places where the lamp's light doesn't reach. It's smaller than he thought it would be.

"So, what brings you here to my humble abode this early in the day?" Keating prompts, his eyes creased with a warmness that Todd's been used to since he'd met him, and one that's been so devoid in any other figure he'd encountered all throughout his life, except maybe for his grandmother when he was eight years old.

Todd doesn't reply immediately. In truth, he thought this part would come simply, easily—that the words would roll off his tongue like how water runs down ducks, but his chest's lodged into his throat, choking him gently in a way that doesn't seem obvious. He doesn't know where to begin, which words to say first, how the tone of his voice should sound, whether he'd sound silly or not, whether he'd be wasting the other's time. The proverbial train's run out of tracks to run and they've all come to a stop short, leaving him to walk the rest of the way—on a road he doesn't know.

Eventually, he pushes himself, breathing in deeply before he asks, "Can I tell you something?"

"You've come a long way. Tell me anything." his teacher replies, voice blank of anything—judgment, admonishment, or anything else, undetected.

"Well," Todd begins, finding the right words to use, "it's…Neil came

back. Just last night."

"Oh? That's good to hear. Did his father escort him?"

"That's the thing. He ran away. He said he couldn't be at home." Todd elaborates, fighting stutters, the words beginning to fall from his lips steadily.

"He woke me up just a bit earlier, and he told me they're—his parents—they're planning on sending him away. Today." his heart begins to pound at this, the reality of it coming closer and closer as the clock ticks and moves forward, this dread that falls and swings over him like some sword. He doesn't understand why this scares him more than it probably should. Or he does, just that he doesn't understand why he lets himself feel this way, to let it go through him this deeply.

"To some military school I haven't even heard of. He says they said it'd help him out, keep him from disobeying them." and then it falls—"Which is the thing, he wasn't doing that at all! I mean, is really doing what he loves that much of a bad thing? You saw him on that stage, it's all he cares for. And his father's taking it away."

He doesn't recall when he started pacing back and forth in that little space, limbs urging him to move because if his words won't catch up with his thoughts, and his thoughts won't with what he feels, he might as well stop staying still.

"It's all wrong, you know it is!"

He finally stops pacing, staring desperately into the older man's eyes, his face gone red and hot. Mr. Keating spends a moment to look at him, how he stands, how his shoulders sag off of him, almost like he can see that invisible weight pulling him deeper onto the ground, wanting him to stay pinned there more than gravity does, and that understanding gaze never leaves or shifts, and Todd thinks this is how all fathers should look.

He sees the change on Keating's desk, right beside the leather wallet that's looking worn and should be replaced, and he counts. Five dollars and ninety-eight cents.

"Take a seat, Mr. Anderson." Mr. Keating beckons, and Todd does, his entire frame curled in on himself on the seat as he slouches and his shoulders droop, even now careful to not disturb anything, not the air or the dust that float around.

“You care a lot for Mr. Perry, don’t you?” Keating says. Todd, reeled from his anxious daze, looks at his teacher, at his soft eyes and careful smile, and nods.

“Of course, I do,” he confirms in a whisper, “I mean, he’s my friend.”

Mr. Keating only gives him another smile, pursed and kind, but his eyes glint with something else Todd can’t decipher, like it’s holding some secret he isn’t in on.

“Is this the only reason why you’ve come here?” Mr. Keating asks, “You just needed some ears to rant to? Or is there something else?”

Todd shakes his head and, without facing the man, says, “I thought I could ask you to do something about it.” he purses his lips as he inhales, turning to meet his teacher in the eyes once more, “I thought you could help.”

His teacher only gives him a sad smile in return, sober and without any mirth, and Todd knows what he’s about to say before he even speaks.

“No…I can’t do anything about that, I’m afraid. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t have any real power to be able to. I’m only a teacher, after all. My influence stops with you.”

And Todd nods as he sniffles, blinking as his eyes threaten to blur. He can only nod when he feels his teacher pat him on the shoulder, murmuring apologies that he doesn’t need to say at all.

“I just wish they didn’t have to take him away. I mean, he’d be alright. I think he’d be, but…”

When he spends a considerable amount of time in silence, Keating takes this opportunity to voice out what’s in his mind, and to say what he’s been seeing in all of Todd since he entered the room, nerves and all.

“Now, why do you care so much?” he starts off gently, careful in the way he says it, like stepping on a puddle, “You’re the one who hasn’t been around for a long time, especially with him. It’s only been four months that you’ve known each other, that you’ve known Mr. Perry.”

“Well, yeah, but he’s my roommate. He’s my friend. And…and he’s helped me…a lot.”

“But it’s a lot more than that. Isn’t it, Todd?”

There's a shift, the air stopping, and then something that feels like glass falling and breaking.

Todd doesn’t reply, just gives Keating a *look*, one that treads between being caught with painted hands in a room of wet color and like caution trudging on apology, and Keating smiles because he understands; that he’s been alive and lived through enough to know what that means.

Todd’s eyes water when they both come to an understanding, shaking his head and failing as he lets it hang low.

“I-I know it’s—” Todd begins to mumble, a slew of apologies for what he is about to fall and fall, before Keating puts a stop to it, laying an aged and comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“No, Todd, it isn’t anything,” he reassures him, “It just is. It isn’t anything you have to apologize for, especially not to me.” he leans into him as he says this last part, like a parent trying to comfort a child, getting close so that they might hear, that it’ll somehow find a way to latch onto their skin, giving him a smile that exudes comfort and safety.

“It’s just what you are. Whether or not that’s something good is up to you.”

Todd wonders how he’s supposed to decide that. After all, it was Keating that figured him out that easily, that Todd thought every single thing that came out of him wouldn’t be worth anything good. That anyone else could do a better job at anything on account that they aren’t Todd.

“You’re not alone, Todd. It’ll be alright.” Keating comforts as his hand finds Todd’s shoulder again.

And Todd cries.

It's that sad feeling of everything going rotten, everything that ought to bloom going to waste, with dead leaves on the marble counter.

The tears that fall from Todd's eyes are odd, strange considering everything he'd confessed, and they aren't falling because of what he is. He's felt enough with what he is, spilled plenty enough tears when he'd stayed up late at night back in Balincrest, 1 and 2 AM bringing

new thoughts, new realizations of what this all could mean. This time, his tears feel hot, and his heart wants to scream and keep crying. It's not shame, he doesn't think. It felt too much like grief, heavy like it was too early to even be there.

This is what I am. This is who I have to live with. It felt more fine, more than okay and enough, when I thought I could live with it with...

And then he feels angry, though not at Mr. Keating—he never could be. He isn't sure what he feels, but he feels it enough for it to hurt, to make him squeeze his hands together, his nails digging into his palm. He wanted to stand up and go punch the walls the way that other boys did, but he knew he couldn't do that, that it wasn't anything like him and he never will or would, so he settled with something quiet but enough to make it clear, "I hate Mr. Perry."

"It's alright," Mr. Keating tries to say. "It's alright."

But it isn't. Not to Todd, it isn't.

When Todd gets back to his dorm, Neil's already up with an open suitcase on his mattress.

Still standing by the door, he spares a glance outside the window and sees that the world is still blue, but brighter than the last time he saw it.

Then his eyes look at Neil, at the folded clothes beside the suitcase, at the little bits of trinkets that Neil owns, which isn't much, only pencils, a compass, a ruler, books, and other things for Welton. The only thing that stands out is the small book placed carefully away from everything else, at a safe distance so that it won't get overlooked or mistaken with the others. Wearied and tattered in places, *Five Centuries of Verse* stands out in gold embossing.

Neil doesn't even turn to acknowledge him, not when Todd enters the room, or when Todd stays by the door where the light of the window can't reach, watching him pack, movements mechanic in a way Todd doesn't recognize in Neil.

"When…" Todd begins, his voice lilting in a way he doesn't want,

“When are they gonna pick you up?”

He thinks he must look like the saddest thing there is. His eyes shake in a way that lets him know tears are threatening to roll down his cheeks again, and his brows twitch, furrowed together. His jaw’s gone stiff, but he doesn’t know how to make it loosen.

He won’t stop looking at Neil. At the space between his shoulder and his neck where his face would be if he turned his head to spare a glance at him.

“If I’m lucky,” Neil finally speaks, his voice hoarse, “probably around noon.”

And the quiet comes back. And every word dies in Todd’s mouth, stopping there at his tongue before they all go stale and limp, leaving him feeling that the inside of his mouth is tied and holding pins with the way they prick and tingle. His heart feels heavy but at the same time doesn’t feel like it’s there at all, like there’s this pit that spawned where his heart was and it fell in.

His eyes find that space between Neil’s shoulder and his neck again. The quiet stays even as daylight comes in through the window.

They meet in some quiet corner of the school, inside of a storage room, hidden by bigger things and shadow. Todd sits up on luggage and bags that aren’t his, holding a cigarette like the rest of the boys, his face sickly and red. The lights are off but it doesn’t matter to Todd because the whole of Welton already looks more darker than it did before. It’s an odd observation, but he could swear the lights and the school were never this dim. Maybe it’s just his head.

He remembers those times when he was still a kid at home and that feeling of the house being darker than it actually was when it was just him and his father, and then brighter when his mom was in the room, almost ten times brighter than he thought the house could be. He feels it now, and he felt it when he sat up from bed this morning. That feeling of safety there and then suddenly not, and then before he can get a good grasp of it, everything feels slow like it's caught in glue or molasses.

Two of them aren't here. The other, they know where, is in his dorm packing his things, dreading whenever he hears the noise of car wheels on stone pavement. The other one, they're waiting to appear.

"Did anyone tell Cameron about this meeting?" Charlie says, impatience seeping into his voice like the way water seeps through paper, leaving a stain on his face of frowning lips, angled brows, and a tense forehead.

"I did." Meeks peeps from his makeshift seat of suitcases.

Neil told them the news when morning routines started and the hallways were filled with other boys trying to get from one place to another. Charlie saw Neil was back and was the first at his door to give some clever jibe, only to get shut down and told Neil would be leaving. It didn't take long for the rest of the boys to come piling at their door.

And now they're here, for some meeting Todd doesn't understand what for.

Charlie stands, his cig pinched in between his middle and pointer finger as he walks to the window that overlooks where Nolan's office would be. He spends about a minute staring out into that place, the corners of his mouth gone stiff before he walks away and sits back down, taking another smoke.

"That's it, guys. We're fried." he says.

"How do you mean?" Pitts asked, beside Charlie and with his elbows resting on his knees as his hands are wrung together.

"Cameron's a fink." he states, cut and flat on the table. "He's in Nolan's office right now, finking."

"About *what*?" Pitts scoffed because he makes a good point with that question. What's there to tell Nolan?

"The *club*, Pittsie, think about it. I mean, what else is there for him to fink about?"

"But why would Nolan even want to know that?"

"Does it matter? Cameron's already out there telling him all about it anyways!"

It's then that the sound of footfalls could finally be heard, all the boys besides Charlie rushing to get rid of any traces of smoking if it were anyone else other than who they were expecting. The bulb turns on and Cameron steps out in front of them from behind the shelves.

"What took you so long to get here, Cam?" Charlie started, standing from where he sat, with a stance that was like he was opening himself to a challenge. He puts his cigarette away.

Cameron only scoffs, motioning to fix his blazer.

"I was studying, Charlie!" he says his name as if it were a slur, as if he doesn't have time for this. All the other boys stay back to watch where this'll take them. "Which you should all be doing too, by the way. Now's not the time for any club meetings."

"Well, now's not the time for you to act like such a priss either. I mean, don't you know anything, Cameron, or do you just not care?" Charlie retorts.

"What's that supposed to mean? I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"You told Nolan everything about the club is what I'm talking about."

"Well, in case you haven't heard, Dalton, there's something called an "honor code" at this school, alright?" he begins to defend, "If a teacher asks you a question, you tell the truth or you're expelled. I mean, it's not like it's my fault Neil's parents called!"

"Doesn't change that you still told him!" Charlie shouts, staring daggers into the other boy's, irritated to no end. Suddenly, Charlie lunges at him, Cameron saved by Knox and Meeks who hold him back.

"He's a rat!" Charlie accuses, fighting the way the other two keep him still. "He's in it up to his eyes so he ratted to save himself!"

When Todd looks at Cameron's face, the way he can't lift his eyes to stare Charlie in the eyes, he spots the guilt, the admission, but he also notices the sharpness of his eyes and the length of his frown, the way the corners dip and reach his chin, and sees there's no apology there too—only annoyance; that this is all a big waste of his time.

And Todd remembers what this could mean for someone else that he knows, what this could mean for Neil when Nolan calls his father back and tells him all about it, what they were doing, and why he even did

all of it in the first place. And he also remembers that Neil won't have anywhere to go when his father finally knows.

And Todd knows they're all upset. Cameron too. *No one* wants Neil gone. They've always been dealing with things their own way, and this is how Cameron's always dealt with his. Todd knows what would happen if any rule was broken, how much that means to Cameron. But he also knows how much the club means to Neil.

The shouting between Charlie and Cameron start to sound muffled and begins to sound far away, and there's this thrumming coming from somewhere inside him that won't slow down. Their voices to Todd's ears make him feel like he's underwater, and there's this pressure in his chest that reminds him of being in the deep part of the pool where he's halfway submerged from the chest down. His heart won't stop beating harder than it should and his head starts to hurt.

"If it wasn't for Mr. Keating, Neil would be cozied up in his room right now, studying his chemistry instead of packing and going away! Hell, he wouldn't have to wait ten more years to get called a doctor—"

"That is not true, Cameron, you know that!" Todd shouts, pointing a shaking hand at the other. He isn't sure where they came from—the words. How they came falling so easily from his mouth, even despite the way his voice shakes. His heart's gone cold, as if it's being squeezed but still won't stop beating hard, unable to keep still, like a horse that just won't be broken in. Cameron looks like he didn't think it'd be Todd to fight him on this, that it'd be Charlie again calling him names.

Todd speaks again, "Keating didn't put us up to anything. Neil loved acting! Neil loved the club!"

"Believe and say what you want but I say *let Keating fry!* I mean, why ruin our lives?"

When Charlie finally punches him, it doesn't even come as a surprise. The boys, all except for Todd, hold him back, but Charlie shakes out of their grasp, shaking his blazer clean.

It's been a long time coming, Todd thinks. Ever since he'd met them, he could always tell there was something itching between them that was threatening to burst, from Charlie's side eyes and scoffs, Cameron's impatience, and everything else in between. It all felt like some mutual act of lenience instead of genuine fondness, not like Meeks and Pittsie, or Neil and Charlie. They were always so different

from the other that it was funny. He supposes there are just people who clash naturally, and there's nothing else they could do about that.

Charlie wants to taunt him again, say something about finking, but he keeps his mouth shut, walking a distance much farther back into the room.

Cameron's nose is aching with a hurt that keeps pounding, all the way to his eyes, and the force of the punch has him stacked against toppled suitcases and bags. His hand's up to his nose, and when he pulls it away, his fingers are stained with red. He looks to Charlie, past all the other boys and Todd, eyes surprised and offended, angry.

"You just signed your expulsion papers, *Nuwanda*." he hissed.

Charlie doesn't seem to care. He just looks at the other boy with a certainty in his eyes that seems to say, *You won't.*

The bell rings. Charlie's the first one out the door, not one glance spared at the boy on the floor.

The day passes by so quickly that Todd's surprised when the bell for lunch rings.

He doesn't recall the past few hours. He remembers early morning, Neil waking him up, the dark hallway towards Keating's room, what happened at the club meeting, but everything else blurs that he feels five minutes ago was centuries before. He does remember the way teachers kept calling him though, scolding him, telling him to pay attention and to stop looking out the window, but even that felt like hundreds of years ago too.

It's lunch and Todd doesn't move from his seat, even as all the other boys move out of the classroom.

It's lunch, which means it's noon. And that means Mr. Perry's going to arrive any minute now. And Todd feels restless, inconsolable.

Todd doesn't know what to do or where to go if he ever does move and stand up from where he's sitting. He doesn't think he can go back to their dorm but he *wants* to go. To see if Neil's still there, whether

he's finished packing or not, or if he's just sitting by the window and waiting.

"Mr. Anderson, out." the voice of Hager calls him back to the present moment, standing by the door with a frown laced with impatience.

"Sorry." Todd rushes to say, grabbing his things and avoiding the teacher's eyes as he passes by him to walk out the door.

As he wanders, he passes by the front where all the pictures are. He stops to look, eyes running across the faces that look back at him– when he hears *it* outside.

He walks to the door, peeping through the glass to see, when he spots the same car from last night outside Everett. The door opens and Mr. Perry steps out into the snow, covered in a coat and scarf, the car door slamming as he closes it shut.

Nolan's there too, waiting by him, greeting him when they get close and shaking hands as they walk towards the entrance where Todd's watching.

He leaves before they can spot him.

He doesn't go to the lunch hall. Instead, he finds himself back in the hallways of Welton again, hoping he doesn't run across a teacher that'll tell him to go away.

He's walking the hallways again, darker than it needs to be, doors on either side of it, and his body feels heavy as his shoes click against the tile. Every step he takes closes the space between him and the other thing that doesn't make his fear ease or go away.

He keeps walking, going up the stairs, even as the tile turns into hardwood, and there are more doors.

He goes to the one he knows, where he's lived. He doesn't know what's going to be there when he opens the door.

He opens the door anyway.

The light falls in first. Neil's face comes after. He's standing by his

bedside, suitcases on his mattress and aligned. His hands are holding the poster for *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* crumpled from the ways it'd been folded, and when Todd walks in, Neil finally looks at him and puts it away, folding it and placing it on top of the bigger suitcase that's leather is peeling, worn down from time and where it's been.

Todd imagines another version of this room; it's the same time as now, and the difference here is that those bags aren't on Neil's bed, and they're empty. Both of them, Todd and Neil, would either be in the lunch hall or here, right where they are, Neil sat by the window and Todd on the bed. They stay here for as long as they want to, or until the bell rings; and the bell will be the only thing they wait for, the only thing that'll ruin this.

"Hey." Neil says, hushed.

Then Todd's back in the room that he's standing in, where dust motes fly as the light shines from the window.

Todd looks at Neil before he can even find his words.

"Your father's here." is the only thing that can come out of his mouth, even those words turning out broken, pitched and cut in places where they shouldn't be.

Neil's lips purse into a smile that doesn't reach his eyes and he replies, "I heard."

He gestures to the window.

"Oh." Todd nods. He turns to look at the window too, at the panes, and he remembers. Not too long ago, something in October.

The days were shorter then, consisting mainly of orange and reddish trees, with leaves all around the ground. The days were shorter and the nights were longer, darker, colder; and they both couldn't sleep then. Todd woke up—maybe it was around nine or earlier—to find Neil at the window, holding the script for his play or a book of verses, Todd can't recall. But he remembers how Neil looked, how he saw Neil then, smiling as his head was against the glass, looking out into nowhere. When he noticed Todd was up, all he did was smile at him.

"Hey." Neil greets with a smile. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Yeah, I think," Todd groggily replies as he sits up. "What are you doing?"

Neil gently lifts the paper from his lap, “Reading.”

“It’s dark.”

Neil’s sitting with his back facing his side of the dorm, his body facing Todd. From this spot, no light comes from outside, the moon shining a few inches away from where Neil is. He’d have to squint his eyes to even really see what’s on the paper. The moonlight’s brighter on Todd’s bed, where it shines and bounces off from the rusted bed frame.

“I like the light off. It makes the place seem smaller. Cozier.” he smiles.

“But you can’t read in the dark.”

“Sure you can. Here, look at this.” Neil’s voice now switched to ribbing, his lips stretching into a grin that Todd can almost see his teeth.

Todd smiles despite himself. “You know what I meant.”

They both share a laugh before Neil goes back to looking at what he’s holding. Todd spends a minute gauging him before he speaks again.

“Neil, you gotta turn the lamp on.”

“Nah,” he replies immediately, “too bright. It would change the whole atmosphere.”

“Okay.” Todd surrenders. “Then let’s switch spots.”

Neil looks at him, his brow lifted.

Todd doesn’t elaborate, only shuffles to move from the bed, patting the sheets.

“Here, you stay here. I’ll stay by the window. I can’t sleep anyways.”

“Todd, no–”

“No, come on. If you’re gonna read in the dark, might as well…”

And Todd stands up, moving to the spot where Neil is sitting. Maybe it’s because of this that it doesn’t take Neil a long time to move, going to sit on Todd’s bed where it’s arguably brighter compared to any other spot in the room. Todd goes to make himself comfortable, trying

to mimic the way Neil was sitting, with his leg up against the panes, and the other down on the floor.

He turns to look outside, at the darkness of the school. He can hardly see anything except for the places that are hit with moonlight.

“You can see the moon from here.” Neil says.

Todd turns to look at Neil, his papers now tucked away as he finds the right angle to view the moon outside. From where Todd's sitting, he can’t get a good view of outside, but the view of his bed looks perfect. He’s just noticing this now.

“It’s beautiful.” Neil whispers from under his breath, eyes sparkling with that distinct shine that lets Todd know that this is Neil. Todd can’t see the moon from where he is, and he can’t move to look otherwise he’d block Neil’s view. He doesn’t mind though. He just keeps looking at Neil, at that wonder that’s on his face, and he doesn’t even realize that he’s smiling. And it’s in that moment that he feels his heart grow bigger than what his ribs could ever hold, but he doesn’t look away despite it.

When he does turn to look, just tilting his head back to where Neil’s staring and sees nothing, he looks back just in time to catch Neil’s eyes. He’s looking at him. He’s smiling at him. There’s this quick cold that spreads through him, replaced just as quickly by a warmness he can’t describe, except that he feels his heart’s dropped down to his toes and then jumped back up to his chest.

Todd looks at Neil too, and then he smiles back. The light from outside is enough to let him see Neil’s eyes.

Looking at the same window now, Todd’s just noticing how dirty they are, smudges and scratches layering every surface of it with snow on the grids. His heart feels heavy and he doesn’t know why he’s thinking about the windowpanes.

He looks at Neil, standing in the middle of the room. He steps forward.

“Are…” his voice shakes, cutting short before he can even begin. He steps back.

“Are you going to be okay?” he tries again. His right foot steps forward, but the left one stays behind, ready for retreat. *Just in case.*

“Nothing I haven’t dealt with before.”

Neil’s smile comes back when he looks at Todd and it goes away just as fast. Todd wants to tell him something, to open his mouth again like that time he did at Keating’s classroom when he stood in front of all the other boys, stripped bare and blind. He wants to tell Neil something, but he’s still trying to find ways to tell it in a way that won’t turn into a shape that looks like him, with words that won’t leave an outline that’s shaped like Todd and the heart that’s at the center of it.

A knock comes from outside and he doesn’t have to speak at all.

“Neil Perry.” the voice, hoarse and abrupt, calls from beyond the door. It’s Hager, come to escort Neil outside where his father’s waiting.

“I’ll be out soon.” Neil calls back, fixing the cuffs of his sleeves, standing in a way that looks like he doesn’t want to move, like he doesn’t know what to do with his whole body.

When he does, he turns to Todd.

“Well, I should be going now.” he says, and he stretches his arm to him, palm open. “Goodbye, Todd.”

Todd doesn’t miss the way his voice cracked. He stares at the open palm before him, can see the way it shakes the more he looks at it. He doesn’t take it, shaking his head as he turns to look Neil in the eyes.

“Don’t go.” he says, and he hates that he’s saying it now; how he could’ve said it earlier, a few hours ago, even in the early morning when he first woke up and Neil told him what was going to happen. He wishes he never left this room. That he should’ve just stayed here while Neil packed, even if he couldn’t bear it. The time with him then would’ve felt ten times shorter compared to all the other times they spent together, but at least then there’d be time spent at all. Now, Neil’s about to walk out the door, with his arm stretched to Todd, and an open palm that reads “goodbye.”

“Don’t go.” he says again. Neil just smiles like he’s being silly. He drops his hand.

“Todd, it’ll be fine,” he tries to reassure him, a breathy laugh leaving with his words, a detail of Neil that never goes away. “I’ll be fine. It– it’s not a big deal.”

“Of course it’s a big deal.” Todd says back. “You– you don’t want to do this.”

“Todd, it’s not like I’m the one deciding.” Neil says back. “I mean…if it were actually up to me…”

Silence falls over them when Neil doesn’t finish, his sentence hanging in the air.

“Why do you listen to him?” Todd says out of the blue.

“What?”

“Your father. Why do you listen to him? I mean…” Todd doesn’t know what to say after that. He thinks he does know though, the answer to his own question, understands to a degree than he’d care to admit or realize. And he’s sure Neil doesn’t even want to talk about it. He’s scraping at the sides, digging through muck and dirt and getting his hands and nails dirty, just to find something that’ll make him ease into this. To find a moment that’ll leave him okay even after all of this is gone, one that he feels okay to sit in for as long as he needs to.

“Because you know why. What else do you want me to say? What do you want me to do?”

And that only makes Todd want to hide again, make the other boy forget what he said. Todd knows what he wants, sitting there in his heart for as long as it can. He knows what he wants, but he’s not sure if he’s allowed to want it, to ask for it; to say it out loud. The closest he could ever get to it is: *Stay.*

Please don’t make me say it.

His heart’s loose again and he’s crying before he even knows it. It’s subtle, not loud or something that takes up the whole room. In fact, he’s still trying to hold it down, and he feels his throat start to bleed because of this, the lump growing bigger and bigger each time he does. Neil and the room start to blur, and all he can feel is the salt that keeps sliding on his lips, into his mouth. He can’t get himself to stop, not even when he goes to hide his face in the crook of his arms.

When he feels a hand hold his shoulder, he wants to cry even more. He can hear the way Neil calls his name, can hear the *Todd, hey, it’s okay* but it doesn’t reach him because he knows it’s not true; that Neil’s only saying this because he’s standing here with his face wet and body shaking. He knows it won’t ever be, even after this. Not

when it's like this. Yet, he still tries to calm down, with Neil trying to hold him, covering Todd with himself, until Todd finally stops.

When he finally calms down, Neil's next to him—just right next to him that the air around them is humid, not enough space between them for it to reach anywhere. Neil's right next to him and Todd can see things he's never seen before, and the light of the room makes Neil feel closer than he already is.

Hager knocks on the door again.

Todd isn't crying anymore and Neil should back away, but they linger; in that shadowed corner by the door where Neil's arms never leave Todd, and they're looking at each other's eyes, and Todd thinks his looks confused, like it's waiting for an answer. *Tell me what this means.*

He doesn't expect the kiss.

Neil's kissing him, and he's closer to him than Todd ever thought he could be. His heart stops beating. And then it starts again when he feels Neil's hand on his cheek.

It's not like kisses in movies they play during weekends back home. Obviously, this is very different from that; and it's not like the kisses where the two people's lips fit perfectly against the others'—it's not, because Neil's lips are resting against Todd's, and Todd's isn't moving or kissing back. And it's sudden and clumsy, and Neil has big teeth that Todd felt it against his mouth at some point before he put it away. But it still feels soft nonetheless. And Todd's whole body wants to give out, and he feels his heart die and then come back with extra roots.

When Todd finally kisses back, Neil pulls away before he can even do it properly.

Before he can ask, Neil beats him to it.

"I'm sorry." he says.

The knock on the door comes back, louder this time.

And Todd understands that that apology might as well have been an *my life is over anyway, I might as well have done it, that's why* and a *now you'll leave me alone for good and it'll be less hard for me.* That from this view, the both of them are too boyish, with too deep voices and too square jaws for this to be something they're doing; for anyone else to

understand what this means. That what Neil just did means he might as well be buried instead of sent away, but that it doesn't matter anymore, not to him. He's alive but he might as well be dead and gone.

Neil doesn't look at him, staring at the floor and licking his lips clean before he goes to get his bags. He opens the door as Todd watches him step out.

The room's gone quiet. Todd stands watching the door and he feels that the empty space wants to eat him alive. The bare bed on the right of the room, the empty closet, the marks on the floor by Neil's desk from him pushing his chair back, and the closed door that looks like it has the words *'sorry'* marked on the wood. They stand out much clearer in Todd's mind.

He doesn't know how long he stands there for until the bell rings.

Classes have probably already resumed, and when he gets out of the room, the only thing that'll be waiting for him will be demerits and Neil stepping inside of his father's car, and an empty seat in the middle of the classroom.

Open the door.

Open the door, Todd.

His heart's beating when his hand falls on the knob, synchronous like the way a typewriter sounds when it's spelling out a message. In this case, his heart's saying *go outside, don't let it end like this. Run down this hallway again and don't let the dark make you think you're doing something that makes no sense. Go outside and the car will still be there. Go.*

And the halls turn shorter as Todd runs to make it down the stairs, and he passes by a window that overlooks the grounds and trees, covered in snow instead of green. And he remembers something Neil told him during a weekend when they were there, a script in Todd's hands and Neil running in circles and popping out from behind trees.

"We should live in New York together."

"What?" Todd almost laughs.

"What? It's a good idea. See– you like to write, yeah? I'm sure New York's got a lot to offer for that kind of thing. And then I'll act! Yeah!"

Todd, even if the prospect does sound silly, ponders over it, trying to imagine a life that Neil's describing, of walking into a room and seeing him standing there every day, when Neil speaks again, "And then when you're finally some bestseller, I bet you, there'd be tons of people wanting to adapt what you write, and I can even star in them. And we can just live together and help each other out with the rent. And Charlie and the others– they can just visit us too."

Todd laughs then, rolling his eyes at the absurdity, but only because of how elaborate this entire plan is. That Neil's making years of buildup sound like something that'll happen overnight; that Neil thinks anyone's even gonna see what Todd writes.

"Okay, and what'll your father say about that? You think he'll let you?"

"I'd be out of school then! He can't touch me in New York, not in my own house."

"You'll just end up in a commercial." Todd jibes.

"At least I'd end up anywhere at all!"

"Touché. Do we get bigger rooms then?"

"You can have the bigger room if you want." he replies easily.

And the talk about New York ends there, Todd lifting up the pages he's holding so he can read the lines again.

"Uh– 'And thy virtue's force perforce doth move me; On the first view, to say, to swear, I love thee.'" Todd reads aloud for Neil to repeat. Neil, however, just looks at him confused before he's making his way to stand beside Todd to look at the script.

Todd stares at him, also lost, watching where Neil's eyes land on the page before his eyes register what he's looking at.

"There must've been a mistype," Neil says, pointing to the space above the lines where the wrong name is placed, "these aren't my lines." he says as he holds back what sounds like a laugh. "My character left about seven lines ago. I think it's supposed to say Titania."

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't keeping track—"

"No, it's okay," Neil reassures with a smile, the corners of his eyes

wrinkling, “just say it with more *feeling* next time, alright?”

“But I do though.”

And Neil just shakes his head as he smiles, like he’s aiming to rile him up even if it won’t work, and he’s gone to walk ahead again as Todd pages through the script to find lines labeled with the name Puck.

Now, Todd’s running to make it out the door and it’s early December. The bell rang but the hallways still have boys walking to get to their classes, and there are also boys outside the corridors, getting to places they should be; and so is Todd. All the others are looking at him like he’s gone mad but there’s no space in his mind to stop when he’s almost close to the lobby.

Finally, he’s standing there, on the tiled floor of the room with the glass cases and flags. He sees the car’s still outside, the trunk open, just past the first road of the hairpin turn. He’s just about to open the door when Nolan's voice reaches his ears.

“What are you doing, Mr. Anderson?”

His voice echoes and falls off the walls like it has its own megaphone. Todd turns his head to look at him, the way he’s standing in the center of the hall, shoulders squared and fists rounded.

“Get to your class now, Mr. Anderson.”

Todd knows what he means when he says that. Under that layer, it’s a warning. *Stay inside, don’t you dare leave this room.*

And Todd’s surprised when he realizes he has no time for that; that instead of stopping, his hand turns the knob of the door and his other is pushing it open.

“*Mr. Anderson.*”

Another warning.

Todd steps his foot outside, past the interior door. One more left. Nolan’s moved from his spot, strides wide and pace fast, right foot before left.

“We’ve had enough trouble in this school, Mr. Anderson. I won’t have you make any more. Get back inside.”

And Todd stumbles on his way out the final door, pushing it open, feet

stepping into snow, left before right, nearly falling as his feet sink into the snow and sleet before he catches himself. Todd still has plenty to tell Neil, and the path he leaves on the snow is enough to tell that; that he's walking out into the cold just to tell him more. Even if it's just this one big thing at the end of it.

Don't leave. Or listen before you do. I couldn't tell you before because I didn't know what to do with myself and everything felt wrong then, but now…. Please listen.

Perhaps Nolan's yelling was enough to start a crowd because the boys that were passing outside stop to look. They're not plenty, but they're still there, in their winter coats and shoes that weren't made for the weather.

He sees the car when he turns his head—by the road down the path, across the street—and he sees Neil, standing by the trunk with his head down while his father clears the windshield.

"Neil!" Todd yells and the sound echoes into the air. It's the loudest he'd ever been, he thinks. Unlike his yawp at the classroom, or that time with Neil at the dock. It's not any different than a yawp, it is one even. And it shocks him almost when it comes out of his mouth that easily, that loud; but it doesn't surprise him that the yawp he yells ends up being Neil's name. At the end of it, he doesn't think it would be anything else.

It's enough to get heads to turn, for Nolan to stop short by the entryway. Neil also turns to look, and a flicker of light comes to his eyes when he sees him. His father isn't an exception as his head lifts up from the snow that's covering his car to the boy standing in the middle of the path.

Neil doesn't know what to think or expect. Todd running out of the school and out near the street is the last thing he'd ever thought would happen today, and he stands still as his eyes never leave the face of the other boy's, even if it's cold and the snow keeps falling. He can even see the faces of other students from behind classroom windows, trying to get a view of the show.

Neil's trying to get a good view of Todd, trying to assess the look he's being given, even from all the way on the street when Todd's standing at the center of the white path.

"Neil, get inside the car." his father tells him, glaring at Todd in a way that means he wants him to leave. When Neil doesn't respond, doesn't

move, his father goes to grab his arm, dragging him to the car door.

“Don’t think for one second I don’t know about that stunt you were going to do back home.” he hisses, “After everything I’ve done for you, after everything your mother gave you, you’re going to pull a gun out while we’re asleep—while we're *vulnerable*. You need to get your head straight, Neil. Now I’ll do anything to protect this family, even if it means I have to send you to an asylum. Don’t think for a moment that I won’t. Inside the car. Now.”

That snaps Neil away from his earlier daze, confusion and dread falling over his face.

“Father, it’s not what you think,” he tries to defend even as his voice shakes and his breath stops short, “I– I wasn’t going to hurt you or Mother.”

The idea itself sounds ridiculous to Neil, and to think that’s what his father believes he’d do still leaves him with whiplash even if it should’ve been something he’d expect.

The car door opens. Mr. Perry looks him in the eye, cold and without consideration.

“Inside the car, Neil.”

It’s when he considers doing it, stepping inside and closing the door, that he hears Todd again.

“Oh, take the sense, sweet, of my innocence!” Todd recites, and the words ring familiar in Neil’s ears. From backstage rehearsals and to paging through stapled papers, and to afternoons in their room and weekends in the trees. He’s heard it said over and over these past few days, but not like this. When he looks back, Todd’s standing up on a stone bench that's doused in snow. He almost wants to laugh just at the sight of it.

And the words fall without stopping from Todd, like water from a faucet with a broken tap. He’s pushing them out as fast as he can while still trying to get it through to Neil, to tell him.

Their eyes are locked and they don’t look away.

Please understand what I’m saying to you.

And everyone’s watching them, and they’re all curious. But Todd

doesn't see them, their faces blur out of focus like a crowd he saw before, and he's standing there with words bubbling in his chest to say to the boy across the street.

His heart won't stop going crazy, and his ears start to feel hot in the cold. This is the most he's spoken in front of everyone, and he feels like it's climbing its way up to his mouth for him to vomit out, but he keeps going.

"Love takes the meaning in love's conference! I mean that my heart unto yours is knit! So that but one heart we can make of it!"

His hands are shaking and they've gone cold, and it isn't because of the snow. He's making sure Neil's eyes stay on his. He keeps going, keeps bringing back the words he remembered when that script was in his hands and he had nothing better to do. Neil said he loved the script—each verse and chorus and line of the play making him feel alive—and Todd's keeping that in mind now. Except this time, it's not an act for a play. He's standing in front of everyone again and this time it's for two people instead of just himself.

"Two bosoms interchainèd with an oath–! so then two bosoms and a single troth! Then by your side no bedroom me deny," he breathes and the cold crawls past his throat and to his lungs, "For lying so, Hermia…! I do not lie."

Neil's looking at him the same way back in that classroom, and Todd can see it this time because his eyes aren't down on the floor.

And there's another one he wants to say, but he forgets how it went and which words came before the rest, but he remembers the last line. How when he read it out loud to him that one afternoon outside when the light was brighter and the trees felt more alive—how his face seemed to stretch wider the moment he said it out loud. So he says it.

"On the first view, to say, to swear…I love thee."

He hopes he says it with feeling this time.

And he can see, even from here, the way Neil's fighting back a smile or a laugh. Maybe it's because Todd now remembers this line had something to do with a girl falling in love with an ass, or if it's because when he read it aloud the first time Neil told him it wasn't even something he'd say once he's on the stage, that it wasn't his lines and Todd had to stumble through apologies after; or if it's *something else* with the way his eyes seem to glint in a way Todd can't name but

can recognize because he's seen it in himself before too.

Don't leave.

This is the most exposed Todd's been. He feels all of his skin's been stripped bare to show all of the red and ugly parts beneath—for people to see what makes him alive. *This is what I'm made of. Every bit of it.*

And Neil can see it all the way from the road. He sees it in the twitch of Todd's hand, the way his eyes look at him with a quiet beg of *stay*.

Then Nolan finally leaves the entryway, striding towards Todd with furious eyes.

"Mr. Anderson, get back inside *now*."

And his father's doing the same, nudging him inside the car as he says, "For God's sake, Neil!"

When Neil looks back, Nolan's already made it to Todd, sharp eyes and mouth spewing words that promise demerits and punishment.

"*Neil.*" his father repeats.

And he's not proud of it, looking back at Todd and meeting his eyes before he looks away and enters the car, but his heart feels fickle like a stubborn broken wick again. His father shuts the door immediately, but he still goes to look out the window, glancing at Todd's face and his sullen eyes. He hopes he can see the sorry in his through the glass.

His father follows inside after he clears the windshield, the door slamming shut as his hands grip the wheel and the engine runs. Neil glances at the rearview and his eyes meet his father's by accident. They both look away. Neil doesn't know which of them does it first.

Why do you listen to him?

Why does Neil still listen to him? He can't remember any *good* reason why actually. Because it was what he owed them, maybe. Or maybe because his mother's been too quick to tell him when he was younger that though his father wasn't perfect, he was still his father. That everything he ever did was for his own betterment, even if it didn't feel like that in the moment; and that even after everything, he loved him. She really wished he'd believe her. And maybe his father does, just not in the way Neil understands or wants.

There's this guilt that falls over him when he sees his father's eyes, at the age that's there. Neil thinks that after everything his father's lived through, this is the reward that makes it all worth it: a good son that won't make things for him any harder. That this is what he's been promised. But Neil is not the son his father wants, and Neil doesn't know how to fix that.

This isn't what either of them wanted from the other.

And maybe his father did love him at some point and it came easy. When he first came out crying and when he was just a little boy that had no one but his father and mother, or when before Neil's even been Neil. And he does love them—he never wants to be the reason why his mother cries or why his father won't open his mouth at dinner during the holidays. He never wants to walk inside a house that's so still he'd start to think everyone in it died.

And he keeps tearing himself apart because of that. Like there are two parts of him, two hearts split apart with heads of their own, with minds that think this: one heart's holding what he loves, what he wants his life to be, and the other carrying a weight that never lightens. Both of them keep fighting.

I want to be happy.

He sees the structure of Welton, browns and whites at every glance he lays his eyes on, and he thinks of his friends, of his teacher; what they'd feel now. And he thinks of Todd, standing there in the pathway with snow on his shoulders and hair and cheeks stained red from the cold. And he thinks of New York, of a shared apartment with split rent and two bedrooms—big enough for the both of them. An open fire escape so the room never gets hot.

And here's where his hearts stop fighting to sit down. And Neil's never been the poet but in his head, in his vision of this, they're sitting in front of two mirrors, and they're asking each other this: why are you beating? What do you love enough to stay alive for?

The one that's carrying heavy weight says *I exist because I ought to. Because there are people who won't like it when I disappear.* A good enough reason. The other one, the one that's carrying what it loves, holding onto it tight inside a soft bag, says *I exist because I ought to. Because there are people who won't like it when I disappear. And I exist because I want to wake up one day in a room that's my own, and that I'd be at peace during the holidays because I won't have to come back home;*

and the littler me says I'd be at peace when it's 5 PM when the working hours are done and I won't have to dread the living room door opening. And the walls of the house won't feel like they're pointing at me. I'm a little offshoot of a heart that exists because there are people that love me, and because there's a boy in that school who wants me to stay because he might love me too, even if it might be odd or strange and no one else will get it. I exist because I'm holding out hope that I'd be happy. And I'm holding out hope to get that, as far as my arms can stretch.

All his life, his mother's told him that this is what love is: it's hard and it isn't always happy. That there's always something you're going to have to give up to get that. And that at the end of it, it's what you love that makes that decision. Throughout his entire life since he's heard that from her, he always wondered what she was thinking about—and if it was a person on her mind, which person was it.

And Neil's been aiming for love from his father, from his parents, his whole life since the schism showed when he got bigger, to get them satisfied and to show them *I'm sorry I couldn't be what you wanted to me to be*; and it nearly doesn't come as a surprise when that changes. It's not a brick crashing through his living room window. If anything, it'd been more like a fly that got into the house and Neil never noticed until it kept landing on top of his breakfast and windowsill. Quiet, but it was still there anyway.

And now Neil's realizing the person that loves him isn't the one that's sat in the driver's seat and thumbing the knobs on the radio, and it's not the love he wants to give up anything for—and that the one who loves him isn't who he thought it would be, but it is anyway, and that person does well enough.

And it's also why he left home that morning in the first place.

Then there's a click. Or a crash—like galaxies colliding into each other. A boom, and then light brighter than the one before.

I want to live. In the end, it's always been that reason.

Like every other thing with Neil, it's a sudden dawning, and yet....

And just as the car's about to turn to make it out of the property, Neil knows what he wants. He's pulling the car over and his father does it by accident when he gets startled by his voice, and then Neil's opening the door and running back up the road, dirty snow on his shoes and more of it falling on his hair.

He hears the driver's side open, followed by his father calling his name but he doesn't stop to turn and look. He keeps running up the incline, back to Hell-ton but he doesn't care, not when there's someone waiting for him.

He's lost enough with his father, and he's got nothing left to lose, and his heart feels bigger because of that—akin to a space opening for more room, and now nothing held inside of it has to be so still anymore. And it's because of that feeling that he laughs, even as his socks start to feel wet and cold.

What he's running to has everything to do with happiness and relief with why he left the gun on the office table. He's had his epiphany, now he's trying to get to the next part, to the denouement—where the curtain opens for the final act and the spotlight's shining on the stage, to the moment where all of this is made worth it.

Nolan didn't let him go after his display. The second the car rolled down the pavement, he didn't waste a minute sending Todd to his office for a lecture.

"Remember where you are, Mr. Anderson." he warned as he set the phone down. "Do another thing like that again and I won't be as forgiving."

Todd's eyes glance to the side of the room, at the paddle resting still against the wall before he looks back at Nolan.

"What did my parents say?"

"That unless you start acting right, you won't be allowed home for the holidays. Be grateful that I'm allowing you to stay here."

"I understand, sir."

"Act right, Mr. Anderson." he repeats, "Remember that you were sent here for a reason. Start considering following your brother's model if you don't have any other proper influences."

When he leaves the office, the bell rings again, marking the start of another passing period. It's passing period again and Todd's been

missing his afternoon classes a lot today, and he really doesn't want to go to any more. He'd rather go back to his room and wait for dismissals.

Walking away from Nolan's office, he sees the lobby again, except the hallways that connect to it aren't devoid of anything this time, students walking and rushing down the halls with arms carrying books.

"Todd!"

He turns to the call of his name, seeing Charlie and the rest of the boys racing towards him past the crowd. Cameron's noticeably absent.

"So how was Nolan?" Charlie asks when they make it to him.

"What?"

"We saw what happened outside from Mr. McAllister's class. We knew you had it in you!" he elaborates with a proud laugh.

Todd shrinks, turning a light shade of red.

"Oh, yeah. That."

"Mr. Keating said it was daring." Knox says, trying to get a proper hold of his books to keep them from slipping.

"Even more daring than Charlie!" Meeks supplies. Charlie shoves him, "No, he didn't."

"What'd you say out there?" Pittsie asks, bringing the topic back before it runs astray.

"You didn't hear me?"

"We heard Nolan." Charlie laughs, "'*Get back inside, Mr. Anderson!*'" he mocks.

"Boys, get to your classes." Hager's voice interrupts, sending most of them stumbling with their heads bowing, except for Charlie and Todd, the latter more surprised at Hager's voice than what he said. The boys start to separate from their huddle, them leaving with *see you later* or a *see you in class.* Charlie's the last to go, tapping Todd on the shoulder and giving him an impressed and proud grin before he blends into the crowd and into one of the rooms.

“You as well, Mr. Anderson.” Hager says before he walks away.

Passing period ends before he knows it, and the last few students are already slipping into their classrooms while Todd’s still debating on going to his own. He’s standing in the intersection of the hallway, long floors of tile behind him and in front of him; to his left, more rooms that lead deeper into the school; to his right is the lobby again. In front of him, the door into the school, behind him, the door outside.

Before he steps a foot forward, there’s a disturbance—a shift in the air—and it’s in the form of footsteps that he feels keeps getting closer to where he is. He looks to the front door, and then to the one behind him, at the glass that opens to the outside and he sees a blur among the whites of winter.

Wide-eyed, he goes to approach it, shoes clicking on the tile as he gets closer to the door. Before he can even register anything that’s going on, the door opens and he gets pulled outside into the cold again.

“Todd.”

“Neil?”

Neil's there. Right in front of him, standing in front of him with snow on his head and his clothes, and his face is flushed. They’re standing on the stairs, by the path, and by the bike racks covered in white. Todd’s more shocked that Neil’s standing in front of him at all.

“What– what are you doing here?”

“I changed my mind. I’m not leaving.”

His voice sounds exhausted, each word leaving with a heave and lungs that’s trying their best to keep up. But despite this, his eyes are happier than Todd’s seen them, the only closest example he can give is when he’s in Keating’s class or memorizing lines, and his smile is so wide that it’s all Todd can see. They’re standing outside and tangled in each other’s arms again, nearly an embrace, their hands gripping the other’s shoulders.

“What–? But your father–?”

“I left him in the car.” Neil smiles, almost giggling like a little boy, like he doesn’t care what happens next after.

And Todd just looks more confused, and now they’re staring at each

other eye to eye, shoulder to shoulder, and Neil's hands never leave his arms. Instead, they climb up from where they were, and he can feel them on his neck and now they're closer than they were before. Neil's forehead is cold against his own and from this view, Todd can see the little bits of snow that are stuck to his lashes. And he doesn't know how to say it, but his heart's back to being loud again—loud like Todd can't ignore it, that it won't let him forget it's there.

When Neil smiles at him, Todd wants to cry. It's then that his hands move too, up to the crook of the other boy's neck, just to make sure he's holding onto something and someone at all.

The only reason they let go of each other is because Neil's grabbed his hand and he's letting them both run the other way—into the woods as the snow keeps falling, and it's sudden that Todd almost falls.

They run deeper into the trees and Todd knows where they are, the path familiar from the treks they had each end of the week. The river's just a few paces down, and the cave is just right there. But they don't go inside the cave this time, the inside too drenched in snow and slippery from ice. And also because they just don't want to go inside. The sky is a bluish gray and the rest of the world is white, but Todd can see a sliver of the afternoon sun through the branches of treetops, and they look red, then amber, and then gold.

He recalls the first meeting, Neil reading with a flashlight in his hands.

I went into the woods because I wanted to live deliberately.

Todd thinks he's seen this before, sunlight bouncing off of buildings and then showering the person lucky enough to fall under it. This time, the sun hits neither of them but with the way Neil's smiling and laughing, he might as well be drowned in it. He's had a dream about this before, but this time, he's just on the precipice of it. In the dream, he's already gotten what he wants. In the dream, he's walking through seas of pedestrians in a city of billboards and traffic lights; and when he stops for traffic, the person he wants there with him is already there.

The last part is the only thing that aligns with *right now*.

And perhaps Neil's legs are tired, and maybe Todd is too, because they end up collapsed in the snow, with the cold seeping through his uniform. He'd probably end up sick tomorrow.

He turns to look at the boy beside him and he does the same. They meet each other's eyes again and they both can't stop smiling to the point where his cheeks start to ache. When Neil moves, turning his body to him completely, Todd's heart skips, and he finds himself turning to him too.

Now, it's still the same thing but a different picture: they're two boys with their arms around each other and the look they're sharing is the same, except they're both lying in the snow with clothes that aren't meant for weather like this. And they both still hope no one finds them.

If he should be honest now, Todd's not even sure when this all happened, but he's sure that there was a moment those few days before this where he looked at Neil and thought *I don't want you to go away*. He can't remember a time before he felt this way.

It's that odd feeling—where you've grown to love something so much you can barely remember what days were like before you loved it, and with every memory you page through, it's always there somehow—always finding you between each page and each line and word; like time forgets its own purpose and warps it all together.

When Neil's eyes move from Todd's eyes to his lips, the picture changes again. Now their lips are touching, and Todd's doing it all right this time. There's snow in their hair and there's snow on their cheeks, and Todd's lips are chapped with flesh bitten from it, and Neil's smiling so wide Todd feels more teeth than lips, but it's alright. He wouldn't have it any other way. The world feels brighter now, even in the cold of December; and they're both lying in cold snow instead of standing in the corner of a dark room, and neither of their hearts feel like dying. And Todd thinks, *This is what it's like to have your chest open and to have your heart step out of it.* While all the while, Neil's thinking *I could be anywhere else. I could be anywhere right now*—and with gladness outpouring that he is not.

No one will ever want them back home. Neither of them want to go back home.

I had a dream about you. We were in the gold room

where everyone finally gets what they want.

You said Tell me about your books, your visions made of flesh and light *and I said* This is the Moon. This is the Sun. Let me name the stars for you. Let me take you there. The splash of my tongue melting you like a sugar cube… *We were in the gold room where everyone finally gets what they want, so I said* What do you want, sweetheart? *and you said* Kiss me. *Here I am leaving you clues. I am singing now while Rome burns. We are all just trying to be holy. My applejack, my silent night, just mash your lips against me. We are all going forward. None of us are going back.*

Richard Siken, Snow and Dirty Rain

End Notes

the continuity of this depends on whether or not the dorms are in the same building as the school itself and i'm now scared to find out if it's not so don't question it because i WILL cry. i had to literally look up maps of st andrews i had to look up a satellite image from google earth just to make sure and i'm still confused so if u are from st andrews n reading this no ur not ♡

anyways i would like to thank richard siken, mahmoud darwish, muna, boygenius, beach bunny, taylor swift, glass vase cello case and but im a cheerleader for this (ESPECIALLY **but im a cheerleader** this entire thing is heavily inspired by the ending scene because that movie is the greatest actually) and i would also like to thank the academy (i made a playlist of all the songs that inspired some parts n themes of this work)

also. the bit about new york was inspired by mikeythemage's own fic check it out!

thank you for reading ♡

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